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GRADES THAT EXPLAIN THEMSELVES

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The ensuing record of individual experiments is offered chiefly as a short cut for overworked theme-readers, though secondarily as a thorny path for the negligent student. Among many ways of insuring faithful and even zealous work, this has commended itself to me, and to several of my colleagues, as yielding a maximum of effect with a minimum of effort.

Four years ago, when I first undertook to teach prescribed English at Harvard, composition courses appeared to me rather more effective in deviling the instructor than in drilling the student. Rewritten themes, for example, had to be compared diligently with their originals, yielding perhaps a dozen lines of revision. For this plague I suggest requiring students to indicate in the margin such lines as have undergone revision. A glance then tells the story; moreover, the students revise more extensively; and, in case no lines appear, it is my practice to credit the student with failure to revise. Another bugbear is punctuation: trivial errors of the same nature tend to recur month after month. To minimize these, I have made punctuation the one subject of the November hour examination. Each student prepares outside the class a series of complete sentences illustrating all the chief uses of all the chief marks of punctuation as set forth in Hill's *Rules of Punctuation*. These he transfers from memory to a bluebook in the examination room. Whoever prepares those sentences, the student learns them. A passing grade for accuracy and credit for range secure in later themes comparative freedom from elementary errors.

These instances may convince the reader that the writer's slogan "a maximum of effect with a minimum of effort" is presented without sophistry. They are offered lest the momentary complexity of what ensues mislead theme-readers into surmising that here is another device for complicating their labors: rather, it is an anti-toxin for the Hillegas scale.

The chief difficulty in grading is that one must weigh a complexity of details and arrive at a compromise. The basis of this compromise is soon forgotten by the teacher and rarely apprehended by the student. Frankly, my grades were usually an impressionistic averaging of thought, structure, accuracy, and expressiveness. And how were the members of a series of grades related one to another? Haphazardly: for as a rule each student wrote in what manner he would, and often without restriction as to subject. The grades were void of unity or coherence; still less had they emphasis. On what feature did any particular grade lay stress? Only the instructor could state—he usually failed to remember; the grades themselves, at least to the students' eyes, passed comprehension.

On the other hand, to explain why a theme succeeds or why it fails, and in what degree, if one attempts to explain these things by either written or oral comment, usually proves both tedious and taxing. In the case of short themes, extended comment is a tyranny of conscience. Yet the student rightly feels that he should know, and should be informed specifically. To convey this information is one purpose of the system herein offered for consideration. After a year's testing in certain sections in Harvard University, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and Wellesley College, the five instructors who have tried it with about four hundred students express uniform satisfaction, as do in nearly all cases the students concerned. They find in it at least two advantages: the time of reading short themes is reduced from one-fifth to one-half; at the same time, a higher standard of accuracy and development on the part of the student may be enforced automatically.

Each theme constitutes a definite exercise in some point of technique: the student, usually at liberty to choose his own topic, confronts a specific problem—how to indicate coherence by conjunctions, how to develop a paragraph by contrast, how to refute a point by the method of residues, how to convey an impression of heat or of loneliness, how to illustrate a certain point of view by means of a short story. The student in time attacks with intelligence a variety of tasks increasingly difficult. Incidentally, the instructor, knowing what to look for, need not adapt himself to

the student's chance point of view—a waste of the instructor's energy, and a surrender of definite means of comparing student with student. In meeting the specified problem, the student adapts himself to the instructor's point of view, as in an examination. The student thus learns to have always a purpose, and to keep in mind his audience.

An instructor of some experience in such assignments will often know, and can state to his class beforehand, certain absolute characteristics which elicit this or that grade. Thus, in giving out an assignment requiring coherence by conjunctions, I supply the class with a table of conjunctions which explains some of the functions of each. I read model themes from previous classes, stating the grades given and why. The characteristic D theme will employ such words as *and*, *but*, *so*, *as*. Its coherence will be that of the student who uses prevailingly compound rather than complex sentences. In the B theme a variety of more precise terms used with some finesse will knit a thought logically developed. In the A theme the mechanism will be hidden, and the assignment forgotten in the reading: *ars est celare artem*.

The letter given as a grade indicates solely the students' degree of success in meeting the assigned problem. If all do A work, all receive A—*pace* all systems of percentages. The remedy is, next year raise your standard. In this way the student knows what to expect, and understands the teacher's reaction. The vicious and perplexing practice of averaging which gives the reader pause is not, to be sure, wholly done away with but is rendered far less complicated.

Compliance with such requirements inevitably results in growth of power. But the student must also retain what he has learned. Because he now seeks emphasis, he must not unnecessarily violate coherence; because he would persuade by his relation to the audience, he must not commit the fallacy of begging the question; because he seeks to portray in a character some dominant trait, he must not derange the physical point of view. Then, too, there are errors toward which—once they have been thoroughly explained—the teacher must maintain an attitude of scorn: such are errors in grammar, spelling, and punctuation.

Any prevalence of serious errors which pertain to past instruction is indicated by a check attached to the letter, as B^V . If these checks be few, or disappear as the course advances, they will in a final estimate of the student's work be left out of account—regarded merely as evidence of early difficulties worthily overcome. The student appreciates this opportunity to have his earlier efforts count at their full value rather than be repeatedly obscured by one recurring fault. B^V is an inspiration to effort; D , a suggestion that effort will prove unavailing. On the other hand, at the outset of the year my classes are warned that if the checks persist, they alone will be counted. The student's work, since he does not retain, is wholly unsatisfactory, and his ultimate grade is a flat failure. B^V constantly repeated offers no basis for compromise, but an alternative wherein the student quickly conceives a preference. Checks rarely occur, except sporadically, after the first month.

A modification of the check, which was conceived independently by Professor C. N. Greenough as well as myself, is the addition of an abbreviation to indicate the prevailing fault. Thus B^{VP} codifies the comment: "You have succeeded rather well in the problem assigned, but you are still grossly deficient in punctuation. Beware!" Many of the abbreviations used in marginal corrections admit of being so used.

One more extension proves occasionally worth using. A few students of taste and of some skill in expression find difficulty (or reluctance) at first in attacking specific problems. Their good qualities are insufficiently indicated by omitting the check. In such cases—rare cases—a flourish may be used, as \mathcal{D} . To be sure, most students who write well can by application meet well any problem the instructor is likely to assign. Yet if the expression in general remains superior, the merit should elicit recognition. $B^{V\text{spcnh}}$ is, as one student declared, almost equivalent to a conference.

Not less on the record sheet than on the themes do these grades convey unusually precise information. An assistant, provided with the instructor's directions to the class, will arrive at substantially the same results as the instructor himself—certainly

with far less divergence than ordinarily when different instructors grade a given set of themes. Whenever, as at the end of a semester, course grades are determined, the records present no mere average of averages based on indeterminate elements; on the contrary, the elements are all set forth, ready for the instructor's decision at the moment when he is most fully informed.

The drawback to this system is the necessity of devising or adopting a coherent set of exercises to run through at least the greater part of a course. Owing to local conditions, individual teachers would very likely be reluctant to accept *en bloc* any given set. The system may, however, be used less drastically, as by grading with a letter for thought and expressiveness, but adding checks for failure in technique. I began it so, using the digraph Æ, to force careless competence into the path of diligence. Or it may be used with such exercises as the imitations of literary devices described by Mabel Lodge in the *English Journal* for May, 1912.

Emphasis may be laid, obviously, wherever the instructor cares to place it. Retention and accuracy may be stressed as much or as little as he desires; yet the student will know without hesitation precisely to what his failure or success is due, and a staff can arrive with this clearer basis for discussion at some approximation to uniformity. What types of errors shall constitute from month to month a lengthening black list, threatening the student with checks? What results may be looked for in any given problem? What shall be the basis of the inevitable final averaging?

Without attempting to answer these questions, which at present must be answered according to local conditions, I shall add that students should be informed fairly early—if a system of problems is employed—not to look for a mathematical average of the letter grades. Exercises vary in difficulty and in significance. Moreover, a prevailingly C record free from checks will indicate a student from whom satisfactory results may usually be expected, and therefore one deserving¹ of final B credit, just as an all-round athlete ranks with a gymnast whose few capacities are better developed. If the student were given free rein, he could make a better showing

¹ In theory, perhaps not. But some concession must be made to student frailty.

of limited range—a showing, though, really inferior to satisfactory all-round development.

Some instructors, and a few students “before taking,” will deprecate this set of finger exercises, this putting the victim in a rowing machine and making him go through the motions. But it develops individual resource: the student chooses his own topic and solves each problem in his own way. One such problem, indeed, is to write a theme informative and interesting to his classmates—or his teacher. The system encourages competition, aligning the class each time for a definite test; whereas, left entirely to himself, the average student “tries on” an old theme, or sports at pleasure with a random fancy, leading nowhere, profiting little. One day when Professor K—— had explained (I think) the glottal catch, his class in semantics endeavored to achieve similar results. “Gentlemen,” he interjected, “if you feel yourselves seized with an irresistible desire to practice phonetics, reflect that you have all the rest of your lives. This hour belongs to me.”

If a course has point, it must teach a definite program of definite things. These the student must master; these he must retain. Otherwise, whatever the excellence of the student generally, it is extraneous to that course. Recognition of it is irrelevant. Encouragement of it—though often praiseworthy and desirable—is a digression. The class as a class must meet its ready-made routine and be judged accordingly. If the course is tailor-made, it ceases to be a unit.